



**UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
REGION III
1650 Arch Street
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19103-2029**

January 29, 2007

Mr. Edward Sundra
Federal Highway Administration
400 North 8TH Street, Suite 750
Richmond, Virginia 23240-0249

Subject: Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the I-73 Location Study,
between Roanoke and the North Carolina State Line Commonwealth of Virginia. CEQ
No 2006533

Dear Mr. Sundra:

In accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and Section 309 of the Clean Air Act, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) offers the following comments regarding the Final EIS for the I-73 Location Study.

The section of the I-73 Location Study under evaluation in this EIS is the section from the Virginia, North Carolina border to I-581/ I-81 just north of Roanoke, approximately 72 miles in length. Significant environmental and social impacts attributable to the project include: 249 residential displacements, 3,370 acres of forest habitat impacted, over 2000 households approaching or exceeding noise thresholds, 112 stream crossings and a reduction of 218 annual vehicle accidents and crashes compared to the existing transportation system. Our comments on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) indicated objections to this project based on the potential of significant environmental impacts, the lack of an alternative evaluating and comparing an upgrade of the existing U.S. Route 220 and the potential for secondary and cumulative impacts as a result of the project.

Upon review of the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS), EPA has continuing concerns for the environmental impacts of this project based on the lack of quantitative mitigation proposals for the estimated impacts. For example the FEIS estimates that the Approved Location Corridor (ALC) will impact 3,370 acres of forest habitat. The mitigation discussed in the environmental consequences section of the FEIS indicates that site specific mitigation measures will become refined during the preliminary and final design plans, and that where permits or memoranda of agreements (MOAs) are required, minimization measures for unavoidable impacts will be developed. This approach is taken for terrestrial habitat impacts and aquatic habitat impacts. This approach makes it difficult to determine whether the impacts of the project will be sufficiently mitigated since the quantification of the mitigation is deferred to the permitting processes. This lack of quantifiable mitigation may be caused by the broad level corridor study used for this project, however there appear to be further opportunities to avoid, minimize and



mitigate for the impacts of this project. EPA recommends continued Resource Agency participation through the required permitting process to fully mitigate the impacts of this project. This continued Agency participation could be incorporated into an adaptive management process that follows the planning phases and attempts to further minimize the impacts.

Additional information has been provided in the Final EIS on the evaluation of the Route 220 upgrade as an alternative. Although this concept had not been fully evaluated as an alternative in the Draft EIS, the concept has been considered in the response to comments and concluded not to meet purpose and need. The additional information provided in the FEIS indicates that the concept would require numerous bridge replacements and bridge widening, and concludes that impacts to wetlands would be comparable to the ALC. Because of the required design speed, frontage roads to control access were also considered for the upgrade concept but would further increase impacts. It is also stated that other impacts of this concept would be similar to Build Option Three. Without the comprehensive comparison of this upgrade alternative to the other build alternatives, EPA is not fully able to evaluate the social impacts or environmental impacts between the ALC and the Route 220 upgrade. It may also be difficult to determine if the ALC would be the least damaging practicable alternative required through the Clean Water Act section 404 requirements without this full comparison.

The indirect impacts of the projects were evaluated based on meetings and discussions between the Lead Agency and Resource Agencies. EPA has remaining concerns about the extent of the direct and indirect effects of this project on forest habitat in the study area. The direct and indirect impacts to this resource may be approximately 7,800 acres.

Based on the significant direct and indirect impacts to forest habitat, the lack of quantifiable mitigation for certain environmental impacts and the lack of a full evaluation of an upgrade alternative, we remained concerned about the environmental impacts of this project. As stated previously we believe that there is considerable potential for further minimization of the impacts of this project if there is continued coordination with the Resource Agencies. We recommend continued coordination through the associated permitting processes and MOAs established for this project, as well establishing an Agency Coordination Meeting to assist in further minimizing these impacts. We would strongly encourage the continued reduction of the forest habitat impacts of this project, perhaps through green infrastructure techniques that support the establishment of wildlife corridors and optimizing mitigation locations. Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this project. If you have any questions regarding these comments please free to contact me at 215-814-3367.

Sincerely,



William Arguto
NEPA Team Leader

